BOOK 1 BONUS MATERIAL

BACKSTAGE AT THE PINEAPPLE CABARET

PART ONE

RORY

"RORY," THE GOBLIN SHAMANKA WHISPERED TO HERSELF. "RORY."

That was her name. *Her* name. She'd never had a name before. The idea of having one had never even occurred to her. It was hers. Nobody could take it away. Nobody could steal it. Not ever, no matter what they did.

She held on to the idea, clutching it against her own chest. Rory. Rory. Rory.

But the presence of this new discovery added questions. Why? Why had it not occurred to Rory that she *should* have a name? What had they called each other before? She couldn't remember. She banged her head against the wall. Just a little tap, causing her piercings to clink. She did that sometimes to jiggle out the thoughts.

Tap, tap, tap.

Boss man Damien had a name. Some of the protected ones, like Tiatha, Glennis, Mordecai, Helix. They had names. Foodz room Bopcas had names. Why was she just a number? And not just the same number, but a moving one? When the magical words appeared, when the boss man spoke with her, her reply would give her an ever-changing designation. Numbers and symbols she didn't understand.

One of the engineers had once suggested that the numbers changed based on where she was standing when she responded. Later, when she'd tested it, she thought maybe he'd been right. She felt bad afterward. The engineer hadn't even been that delicious. Maybe if *he'd* had a name, she wouldn't have eaten him. Maybe he would've started bathing. Names were important.

All around her, the others sat in a haze of smoke. Their raid against the llama cartel had been one of those okay-that-could've-gone-betters. While they'd successfully raided their processing lab and stolen their stash, a group of llamas had moved into goblin territory during the attack and killed the chieftain along with all the younglings and all the oldlings and all the preggos. Not good. Blown them right up.

So, Rory and the others had been forced to retaliate and do a whole lot of murdering of the llamas. Not just a raid, but a full-on scorched-dungeon campaign. They'd driven a bunch of the murder dozers right up to the kingpin's cavern and blown it all up with fun-powder. Murdock had kicked the kingpin in the eggs, and Lorelai had cast *Does This Look Infected?* on him. Rory was planning on taking a bite out of his llama grandma, just to drive the whole don't-fuck-with-our-clan thing home, but she'd been too distracted by their haul. By the time she was ready to do the chomp, the walls were doing that spinning thing. So the llama grandma had gotten away unbitten. That was okay, Rory decided. The llama kingpin was dead. Their production facility was done. The clan had the stash.

And now they were sitting in the burned-to-a-crisp remains of their workshop, reaping the spoils of their conquest. And by "reaping the spoils," she meant tearing through the llamas' meth and the llamas' weed and the llamas' blitz sticks like a pack of rabid blender fiends. They'd looted enough to keep the whole family floating until level collapse.

Part of her registered she should be upset about the death of the younglings. That's why they did this, wasn't it? They fought to impress the boss man, and when he was sufficiently wowed by their crawler-killing skills, they'd move on to the second floor. And then they'd move to the third. Then the fourth and so on. The deeper they went, the safer they'd be. Never mind what that rat-kin shaman had once said to her. That the deeper mobs had their thinkers scrambled. That they didn't know they were in the dungeon. They didn't even know what the dungeon was. That they didn't have continuity from one season to the next. The deeper floors were different every time,

and so the monsters had to change, too. They were like empty fun-powder sacks filled up with different stuff each time.

But did that matter? Maybe that would be better, Rory thought. Maybe they wouldn't be so afraid all the time. Maybe it would be nice not to know where they really were.

Now the younglings were dead. The preggos were dead. There was no more clan. No more family, except who was left in the room.

It would be nice to forget. To be an empty sack refilled with a new thinker that didn't know about that room right there filled with the dead.

Sober Rory would be especially upset about all of this, she knew. So the solution was easy. Don't be sober.

But even shaky Rory was starting to do the bad type of thinking. She kept seeing the chieftain, who was worried all the time. Him and that one youngling. The one with the yellow dress and the ribbon on her head and the gap between her teeth. The one who already knew how to cast *Keister Blaster.* Rory liked the way the youngling giggled when she cast the spell at a dumb regular goblin.

The little girl never had a name. That didn't seem right.

No, no, no, Rory thought. *No sad thoughts.* She needed to stay away from the blitz, which helped relive memories. *No, no, no. I have a name now. I need to be celebrating.*

She turned to a bomb bard who sat to her left, leaning up against the wall. He had a piece of dynamite on his lap, and between hits, he was in the process of tying a llama steak to the dynamite. He would throw the stick to cook the steak. Those bomb bards always liked their foodz cooked. And in really small portions.

"I have a name. My name is Rory," Rory said to him.

"Yeah? I ain't got a name," the bomb bard said. "How do I get one?"

"Someone's gotta give it to you. Princess Donut gave me my name."

The bomb bard seemed to think on this for a little bit. "Can *you* give me one?"

Rory also thought about this.

"Yes. You have a name now. Your name is Meat Stick."

"Yeah it is," said Meat Stick. He started wrapping a potato around the other side of the stick of dynamite.

Rory looked across the way at the other shamanka, Lorelai, who was in the process of kicking a regular goblin who'd lost his pineapple stick during the raid. The pineapples were hard to find. And they were important, too. She couldn't remember exactly *why* they were important. But they were. One couldn't just lose them and not get kicked.

"Lorelai," Rory called. "We're giving everyone names. You do that side of the room. I'll do this side."

Lorelai nodded. She turned back to the goblin, who was curled on the floor, sobbing. "You're Bootprint, Maggot."

Bootprint, Maggot looked up, smiling big. He was missing several teeth. "Thank you," he said.

She kicked him again. She then pointed to another goblin who'd also lost his pineapple stick. "You're next."

Next put his hands together. "Thank you, Lorelai!"

This was all interrupted when the magic words appeared in Rory's interface.

DAMIEN: You idiots aren't supposed to attack neighboring quads. Not unless the crawlers go with you. I am much too busy to deal with this bullshit. Don't let it happen again.

Damien. The boss man. He was a human, but a different type of human than the crawlers from this season. He was always yelling at them for this or that.

Fuck him, Rory thought. *I have a name now. He don't know what it's like.* She mentally typed a response.

5X772*: They was holding out, and they had it coming.

Rory blinked at the magic words. She had a name, but it didn't say her name. She looked up and whispered at the god who spoke the magical words, "I have a name now. It's Rory."

To her utter astonishment, there was a chime. She was pretty sure she was the only one to hear it. She blinked at that. She pulled up the magical words again. She couldn't send new messages to anybody, but she could still read the old ones. Her name had changed.

RORY: They was holding out, and they had it coming.

Yes! It was official, then. If the magic words god said it, then it must be true.

She elbowed Meat Stick. "We should celebrate. But you need to take a bath first."

"Uh," he said, looking sadly down at his half-prepared meal. He'd pulled out a carrot. "What about finishing giving all the guys their names first? Who's that guy?" He pointed the carrot at one of the engineers.

The engineer sat there, and he had his hat, a bowl with a bunch of little holes in it, held out in front of him. The stoned goblin was oohing and aahing as the light caught the little holes just right. The light came from the still-burning pile of coal.

"You," Rory said. "Your name is Spaghetti."

Spaghetti looked up. "I was kinda hoping to be Wallace."

"Fuck off," Rory said. "You're Spaghetti." She pointed at the next guy down. Another engineer, but with a padded helmet. "That one is Wallace."

"Yeah," Wallace said. "Don't be trying to steal my name, Spaghetti."

She was about to name another, but the magic words came again.

DAMIEN: Did you just change your name yourself?

RORY: I did. My name is Rory.

There was a long pause.

DAMIEN: Don't try to go anywhere. I'm sending in a team.

In the back of Rory's dumpster fire of a mind, an alarm bell went off. But it was ringing somewhere in that same I'm-just-going-to-ignore-you headspace that had told her that the llamas didn't use explosives. Not when they didn't have thumbs. Not when they could spit and vomit out lava.

Still . . . those alarm bells jingle-jangling in her brain were insistent. So insistent, in fact, that she spent a moment thinking about this.

RORY: A team? What sort of team?

Message not delivered.

She'd never seen *that* before.

She had a sudden memory. Long ago. Before the llamas were always next door to them, it'd been slash kobolds. The kobold leader had found a safe room, and he'd figured out if they all went inside and behaved themselves, they could stay safe. The chieftain had found out and thought it was a great idea. He'd decided to make the clan do the same thing.

. . . Until the "team" came jogging through the hallway. Big guys in heavy armor that didn't clank like real armor. It clinked and clicked like pottery. And it was different kinds of big guys. Sometimes human. Sometimes the big kobolds called gnolls. Sometimes other creatures Rory could barely fathom. But they all wore the same hard shells as they jogged down the hallway. She didn't know the details after that. Didn't know how they got them out of the safe room. She just remembered there were no more slash kobolds anywhere after that, and there was a lot of blood everywhere until the ratties came and licked it all up. The chieftain had decided not to move them after that.

"I think . . ." she said out loud. In her drug-fueled stupor, it was hard to form the words. "I think we might have hardshells coming in."

Lorelai looked up from where she was kicking Next. "What? What did you say?"

"I think hardshells are coming," she repeated. "Coming for us."

"Why? What did we do?" Lorelai asked. She had a blitz stick hanging from her lip. She looked down at Next and kicked him again. "What did you do?"

"I don't knoooow," the goblin howled.

Rory hauled herself to her feet. The world continued to spin, to sag around the edges. She tried not to look left. That's where the chieftain had lived. That's where the babies had died. Nobody was allowed to go in there.

"Everyone!" she shouted. "Gear up! We got hardshells coming in. They's gonna kill us, I think."

All around, slack-jawed goblins peered up at her through the smoke.

"Hardshells? Coming for us? Why they gonna do that?" Spaghetti asked.

"Next did something to piss them off!" another goblin said. Rory was pretty sure that was Bootprint, Maggot speaking, but she was already losing track of who was who.

"It doesn't matter what Next did," Lorelai called. Her voice was always louder and stronger than Rory's. Especially when she got to kicking. "If we got hardshells coming for us, then we gotta fight back."

"But they're untouchables, ain't they?" Wallace asked. "If we try to hurt an untouchable, we get the zip zap? 'Member when that one bard ran his copper chopper over that fish person's flipper? He just disappeared! He never came back!"

"No, you can fight hardshells," Lorelai said. "You can't hurt the boss man, and you can't hurt the boss man's boss people. The fishies. But the hardshells are wearing hard shells because they're soft on the inside."

So, they got ready for the hardshells. The bomb bards got on their choppers and got their boomers ready. The engineers all got on their dozers. The regular gobs jumped in the back of the dozers, all clutching onto their pineapple sticks. All except Bootprint, Maggot and Next, who didn't have pineapple sticks. They'd each picked up lengths of metal piping as their weapons.

Rory had a bad feeling about this. They were all probably dead. The hardshells didn't fight fair. They weren't like the crawlers, who usually didn't know the first thing about fighting. And the crawlers were usually crying. The hardshells never cried. They had their sticks with the electricity at the end. And in some rare cases, they had their lightning shooters.

But what else was there to do? Rory also prepared. She moved to the back of the room, the heat from the burning coal and dead younglings warming her back. The smell, at least, was pleasant. She had spells she could cast. Lots of spells, but only the ones at the top of the list worked. For fighting, her three go-tos were: *Never-ending Nosebleed. Hangnail.* And *Crackleskin.* She'd used that last one a lot on the crawlers. She'd used it on the llamas, too. That one always got folks to screaming.

She paused, looking at her list of spells. A spark of an idea was misfiring back there, and she desperately tried to latch onto it. There was another spell she'd used a lot, but it wasn't a combat spell. In fact, it was the spell she'd used, by far, the most.

It was called *Revenge.* She'd been taught that the spell was supposed to be cast on someone who was about to kill you, and it'd hurt them bad if they managed to do so. But the spell took lots of seconds to cast, so it was kinda useless. If you had extra seconds to cast it, then you probably had extra seconds to get to running. So most shamankas never used it.

But that wasn't right. They were wrong about what the spell did. Rory learned this a long time ago. The spell let you cast it on things, and it stayed cast on those things. It was an "enchantment." She'd learned that word from the rat-kin shaman. It didn't work on small

things, but it worked on big things. So she'd cast it on the murder dozers when they'd built them. It made it so when the dozers blew up, the blast only went toward the idiot goblin who was responsible for making it blow up in the first place. That way they wouldn't lose a whole crew when an engineer tried to do loop-de-loops in the dungeon hallways with the things.

Just earlier today when they went about smushing the llamas, one of them had fireballed an engineer, and the machine had gotten to overheating. The whole thing had blown to bits, and the llama who'd cast the fireball . . .

And there it was. The idea.

By his left tit, Rory thought. *By his left tit. That . . . that might actually work!*

"Line up the dozers! Line them up at the entrance to the hall with the pipes facing out! And everybody get to the back! Off the dozers once they're parked! Spaghetti and Wallace, get over here! I need you!"

"COME ON OUT, YOU DIRTY LITTLE GOBLINS," THE GRUFF VOICE called, taunting. "We're not here to hurt you."

This was followed by a chorus of hyena laughs.

They had the hallway sealed up good and tight with a couple murder dozers smushed side by side. Only one way in. As far as Rory could tell, there were nine of the hardshells out there. The hallway outside the chamber was twisty, but it caught sounds good, and even with them whispering, she could hear everything they said. She didn't understand most of what they were saying, but she could hear it.

She was starting to come down from her high, which would cause the buzzing to come back. Things would get bad shaky on the outside instead of the good shaky on the inside. The good shaky wasn't all that good for fighting, but it was a mighty bit better than the outside shaky. Rory contemplated what to do about that. She decided

to split the difference and take a swig of some toiletshine she'd bought off the slimes. It burned on the way down, but it kept the buzzing at bay. Long enough so she could hear what the hardshells were saying. She passed the bottle to Lorelai, who stood next to her, also listening.

"We're gonna have to clear this away ourselves," one of the hardshells said. A different one than the first. This one had a lady voice. She was a gnoll. They all sounded like gnolls to Rory. "I didn't bring any heavy ordnance with me. I'll have to call for some to be brought up."

"How long will that take?" the gruff one asked.

"Too long," the woman replied. "We have over 300 expulsions on the slate, with more added by the second. These guys are popping their restraints left and right. So everyone is busy."

"Gods," the gruff one said. "I hope this isn't an indicator of how the rest of the season is gonna go."

"It's already fucked," the woman gnoll replied. "Not only did they push everything out the airlock half-cooked, but they skipped the mob audit, like always. Figuring we ain't got anything better to do than to clean up after them. We're gonna be busy as fuck. Look at these stats. These guys in here are almost *twenty seasons* past their expiration. Anything to save a credit. Did you hear about the Street Preacher boss? That thing turned a soldier from Beta group into a literal pillar of salt."

"Wait," the gruff one said. "Are these goblins in here the same ones that ran into that crawler with the talking rodent thing that thinks she's a princess or whatever? They blew the boss to mulch without even stepping into the boss room. She had that line about the babies they keep playing over and over at the pub."

The woman laughed. "I hadn't heard about that, but maybe. It says the attached neighborhood boss is already dead, thank the gods. Killed by the crawler."

"Yeah. I think this is them. When we get back, you gotta watch the scene. It's a good one. Odette already had it on her show."

Rory and Lorelai looked at each other.

Rory felt a strange sense of . . . what? It wasn't anger. It wasn't rage. Was it . . . She didn't know what it was called. But it made her chest feel as if it was suddenly being filled with sand. It made her feel like she'd already been an empty funpowder sack and didn't even realize it.

Do you want to come with us? Princess Donut had asked that. Rory had said no. She couldn't.

And they'd responded by killing all their younglings.

That was how it was. Goblins killed crawlers, and crawlers killed goblins. Still, Princess Donut had been different. But she *wasn't* different, was she? Rory looked down at the bottle of shine in her hand, and she realized it wasn't enough. What they'd looted from the llamas wouldn't be enough, either. Not enough to keep the bad thoughts away.

"I still don't understand why we can't just have the AI take care of this for us," a third hardshell whined. "When they unlock themselves, they become dangerous."

"You know how this works," the woman gnoll said. "Especially this season, if the rumors are true. The less involved that thing is with judicial duties, the longer it'll last. What happens if it decides it wants to keep them around? Besides, don't you like having a job?"

The whiny gnoll just grunted.

"Hey," the gruff one said. "These things are just old-fashioned steam engines, right? They ain't got anything living inside of them. The relief valves are right there. If I twist this and we fall back, they'll eventually explode. Right?"

"Good thinking, Brewster," the woman said. "They can't have gotten too intelligent if they parked them with the valves facing out. Let's go ahead and—"

"Back!" Rory hissed. She and Lorelai rushed to the back of the room, not waiting to hear the rest. They dived behind the hastily erected pile of sandbags.

Normally, the dozers did take some time to go boom if you

messed with them wrong. But with a bit of fiddling and a re-up of the *Revenge* spell, which suddenly seemed much more powerful than it was when they first built these dozers . . .

Bam!

WHEN RORY CAME TO, EARS RINGING, PIERCINGS ON HER FACE ALL hot to the touch, and everybody all around groaning, the hardshells were gone. The hallway where they'd been standing was nothing but a long, charred corridor that didn't even smell like how people smelled when they got themselves blown up. It was like the directional blast had erased them from existence.

The murder dozers themselves were gone, too. Mostly. The sides of the machines, the sides that had been facing the goblins, remained standing there. But the pieces crumbled to the ground as Rory watched.

"Hey," Meat Stick said. "Has anybody seen my steak?" He'd left his uncooked dinner in one of the murder dozers. But it was gone. Vaporized.

"Do you think they're gonna be extra mad at me now?" Next asked, wringing his hands.

"Should we run?" Lorelai asked.

A strange blue shield suddenly appeared, locking them in the room. Not just closing them in the workshop, but blocking off the chieftain's chamber behind them, too.

Warning: This area is under emergency quarantine. Cleansing will commence in minus two. All Admin personnel must evacuate immediately.

The message came out loud. She'd only heard out-loud messages three or four times before, all in older seasons when crawlers went into the chieftain's chamber. And then the words were scrambled in her thinker. Come to think of it, the words of the hardshells were

usually scrambled, too, except when they gave direct orders like "Get the hells out of my way."

But this time, she'd heard all their words.

The light of the room flashed red, and the message repeated. She didn't know what the word "quarantine" meant, but she certainly knew what "evacuate" meant.

"Where would we go?" Rory asked out loud, answering both the voice and Lorelai at the same time. That sand-in-the-chest feeling was still there.

And she suddenly found herself sitting on the floor.

Death was always a way of life in the dungeon. Goblins died all the time. Heck, they literally ate each other. Rory was always prepared to die. Always. And now . . .

And now.

Now, it seemed different. More important. Something had changed. She never wanted to die. She always wanted to live. And now that she didn't have anything left to live for . . . she wanted to live more than ever.

"Is it because I have a name?" she asked.

All around, the goblins were mostly ignoring her. They all knew what was about to happen. Lorelai was kicking Next again, hurling insults while Bootprint, Maggot helped, kicking him on the other side. Wallace and Spaghetti were hugging each other. Meat Stick had another stick of dynamite out, and he was affixing another llama steak to it. The rest of the never-got-nameds stood about, looking terrified.

What do you want?

She blinked.

These were magic words spoken just to her. But they weren't signed. The words just floated there.

"Wha . . . what?" she asked out loud.

There was no answer, but the words remained there, floating in her vision while the light of the room became an even darker red.

What *did* she want?

She thought of the younglings. Of the chieftain. Of the preggos. Even the oldlings. She thought of the goblins all around her. After all this time, all their work, what did they have to show for it? They were all either dead or were about to die.

All of this was for nothing. Nothing.

She thought of the little goblin girl with the yellow dress and the ribbon on her head.

RORY: I want her to have had a name. I want her to have been Keister Blaster.

There was no response. No chime.

She thought of the sand in her chest. She thought of how much heavier she suddenly felt. She moved back to the message.

RORY: I also want revenge.

Cleansing Commences Now.

THERE WAS A WASH OF HEAT, A BLINK, AND SUDDENLY RORY AND the rest of the crew were in a new place.

It was a giant, dimly lit room. She could see distant walls, but they were far, far away. Above her head, there was a ceiling, but it was very, very high. A strange terror filled her. She'd never been in such a wide, empty space. It felt too open, too wide, like she was suddenly falling. Her breaths came to her in surprised, ragged gasps as she looked about. The ground wasn't rock. It wasn't tile. It was a weird, shaggy substance. Soft to the touch. Like hair or fur, but not real hair. Not real fur.

She fought not to close her eyes.

I'm alive. I'm alive.

In addition to her own crew, there were others here, too. But they

were all very far away, and there weren't many of them. All distant figures hidden in the low light of the gigantic room. She recognized one of them, however. The closest one. It was grandma llama. The one who had gotten away. It was her along with a small group of the regular bad llamas.

"Where are we?" Spaghetti asked.

Welcome, Rory. Welcome Backstage. You will reenter the playing arena soon.

PART 2 WILL APPEAR AT THE END OF *CARL'S DOOMSDAY SCENARIO.*